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ABSTRACT

The document describes the management and governance of an alternative school, namely, the High School in the Community (HSC) in New Haven, Connecticut. HSC, designed to provide a choice of learning environments within the public school system, serves students dissatisfied with their previous school experience. The Policy Council, staff meetings, committees, and the Facilitating Unit of HSC are described. The Policy Council, comprised of eight students, four parents, and four staff members, is involved in setting goals and priorities, ratifying the firing or hiring of teachers, disciplining, and settling disagreements about class offerings and spending. Staff meetings occur twice a week. Because of these frequent meetings, teachers are better prepared on any given issue than are students or parents; thus HSC is a teacher-run school. The rationale for this situation is that teachers' commitment is both broader and for a longer term than parents or students. The Curriculum Committee and the Guidance Committee oversee all aspects of the HSC curriculum, support innovation and experimentation, make recommendations for change, and maintain the excellence of the HSC guidance program. The Facilitating Unit deals with the routine administration of the school. Members hold office by majority consent of the staff. A brief history of HSC from inception to use of the present model for administration concludes the document. (KC)

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MANAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE

by Geoffrey Smith

SP 011 951

MANAGEMENT AND GOVERNANCE

All of our formal structures and processes have grown out of our collective experience. We see them as a means to achieve our ultimate purpose as stated in the school philosophy: to work for the betterment of self and community, and to provide a viable model for educational change.

Policy Council

The overall responsibility for running the High School in the Community is the function of the Policy Council. The Policy Council is made up of eight students, four parents, and four staff members. The election for these positions is held during the last week in October, and members serve from November to the following November. The Policy Council has final authority on all matters within HSC. Its authority is limited by the policies of the New Haven Board of Education.

The Policy Council is involved in setting the goals and priorities for the school. It ratifies the hiring or firing of teachers. It is involved in the general discipline process, and can take action on such matters as staff and student attendance, the use of the building, or admission policies. It has the final say on any disagreement regarding course offerings, or on any dispute over how special monies are spent. In addition, the Policy Council can establish other areas of interest and authority whenever necessary.

There are two Co-Chairpersons, who alternately preside over meetings. The two must be chosen from different constituencies, i.e., a student and a parent, a student and a staff member, or a parent and a staff member. Together the Co-Chairpersons set the agenda for meetings and co-ordinate Policy Council activities. There is one Secretary who takes the minutes for each meeting and handles any correspondance for the Policy Council. All meetings are open to everyone connected with the school, unless otherwise indicated.

The Policy Council can establish committees for particular jobs whenever necessary. There are two standing committees with specific assignments. First, a Public Relations Committee, to help represent the Policy Council and the school to the general public. Second, an Elections Committee, to help organize and run the elections for the Policy Council positions. Only the chairperson of any of these committees has to be a Policy Council member: the other people on the committee can be any student, parent, or staff member at HSC.

Staff Meetings

The staff meets regularly twice a week. These meetings consist partly of reports from committees, partly of announcements or information sharing, and primarily of general discussions of school-wide issues. These discussions can lead to specific decisions (major decisions, effecting the entire school community, would have to be ratified by the Policy Council), but they at least provide a regular time for staff to share experiences and ideas, and to build a sense of togetherness that is imperative for the success of the school.

Because of these frequent meetings, teachers are far better prepared and organized on any given issue than either students or parents can be. The result is that HSC is in fact a teacher-run school. It is very unusual for staff decisions not to be ratified by the Policy Council. We feel this is entirely appropriate since our commitment to the school is both broader and for a longer term than either parents or students. In turn, this sense of control which teachers have over their professional life means that we can feel comfortable making a very strong commitment to HSC.

Every June after classes have ended the entire staff, and any students or parents who are interested, spend two weeks reviewing the past year and making plans for the next. These all day, intensive discussions provide a valuable forum for everyone to share their feelings and ideas about the whole school process. Every year changes, both major and minor, are made in the various parts of the HSC program.

Committees

There are presently two standing committees which meet weekly. They are the Curriculum Committee and the Guidance Committee. Each of these committees consists of four staff members, one parent, and one student.

The purpose of the Curriculum Committee is to oversee all aspects of the HSC curriculum, support innovation and experimentation, and make recommendations for change as appropriate. They also review course descriptions and put together the course catalogue four times each year.

The Guidance Committee is charged with maintaining the excellence of the HSC guidance program. It makes suggestions for improvements and facilitates change when needed. This committee works closely with the Guidance Counselor (who is a member) and supports all staff members in their guidance work.

Facilitating Unit

Specific day-to-day decisions which must be made in order for the school to function well are handled by the Facilitating Unit. This group consists of three, four, or five staff members, elected each Spring for the following year. Each of these people has a specific area of responsibility, but all work together in dealing with the routine administrative functions of the school and in planning strategy for the future, which the staff as a whole could not easily do. To be effective, the Facilitating Unit members must be able to work closely with each other, and experience has shown that they function as a mutual support group, helping each other out emotionally in a way that is difficult for a larger group. This mutual support can provide an important impetus to get things done when the rest of the school is going through "back to school jitters", "midwinter doldrums", "spring fever", or whatever malaise happens to be in season. Specific job descriptions and titles, and the number of members, have varied every year, but presently the unit is made up of the Facilitator plus three additional members.

The Facilitator is the chief administrator of the school. His job includes many responsibilities traditionally assigned to the Principal of a school, and he is often thought of as such by those outside the HSC environment. The Facilitator handles all relations with the city administrators and the Board of Education. He is responsible for staff attendance and making out the payroll. Although staff evaluations are the result of several different types of input, the official report must be made out and signed by the Facilitator. Perhaps most important, the Facilitator is expected to maintain a general overview of the school, identify weaknesses, and propose meaningful changes. Besides these traditional "Principal" jobs, he also teaches one class and is expected to seek out possible funding sources for maintaining and improving the program.

The other members of the Facilitating Unit have responsibilities for specific parts of the HSC program. These include overseeing the student membership and guidance lists, staff support, building maintainance, budget record keeping, overseeing the Career Orientation Program, and supervising office personnel. They also teach one class.

Although these four people are thought of as the administration of the school, they are elected to their positions, and hence hold office by majority consent of the staff. Any decisions which they make, either individually or collectiviely, can be challenged by the staff or the students. No one needs to feel left out of the decision making process.

History

Very few of us who have lived through the school's evolution would recommend our original model to anyone starting a new school today, but a brief look at our history will suggest why we arrived at our present structure and how others may bypass some of our first steps.

The people who began talking together in 1969 about the formation of an alternative school in New Haven were teachers in a large troubled high

school with a highly bureaucratic hierarchical administrative structure which stifled creativity among teachers and tended to control rather than meet student needs. Teaching there was most often a lonely experience, and whatever success we achieved came about as a result of our finding individual ways of handling the problems we faced each day. We were drawn together not only by a commitment to students and teaching, but by our negative feelings toward the institution we were in at the time.

Coming out of this setting, we were anxious not to form a new administrative decision-making structure which would duplicate the one we had left. We quickly made it clear to the teacher who suggested that we work together that his function as a leader would be limited to (1) bringing us together and co-ordinating our activities and (2) acting as a liaison (figurehead) in negotiating with the central administrative structure of the school system. Of course, in order for us to get moving at all, he carried out many necessary organizational tasks, but we were a suspicious group, and his reward for these efforts was more frequently blame than praise.

Fortunately we did have the Philadelphia Parkway alternative school model to examine in deciding on our own structure. We also had several months, beginning in February 1970, to meet together, get to know each other, and come up with a skeletal structure which allowed us to present a proposal to the Board of Education in May and open our doors in September of that year.

When the school opened, its day-to-day management came from two sources. (1) We had twice-weekly staff meetings, often three or four hours long. All official decisions, even the most minor, were supposed to come from this group. We were determined to arrive at all decisions through consensus. The myriad details of organizing a school made this a practicable impossibility. As a result, large decisions were usually made in despair and disgust after endless discussion; small decisions were made unofficially by the person who

faced a problem at any particular moment and could not put it off until the next meeting. Our standards were high, and so was the level of frustration. We had at this time neither one set of ideas nor one person to give our efforts clear direction and organization. (2) Teachers had almost total freedom to define their individual jobs both in terms of general educational goals and conditions of work: number of classes taught, hours of work, style of working with students, and so forth. This worked reasonably well initially since we had spent countless hours working together already. We were all full of enthusiasm for the school, and, having made it happened, we each had a personal investment in its success.

Students and parents were encouraged to form their own organizations so as to make their ideas felt in the decision-making process. There were meetings held ("Town Meetings" for the students and parent meetings in the evenings), but since parents and students had much less opportunity to work together than teachers, they had difficulty in contributing to the school's management in any organized way. It was to deal with this difficulty that teachers took the initiative in forming the Policy Council in the last half of the first year. At that time, representation on the Policy Council was the same for each constituency: five students, five parents, and five staff members.

Individual freedom to teach and decision-making responsibility made the first year of HSC exciting for everyone involved; however, we came to feel that there were some inherent disadvantages in such a structureless, leaderless school. Teachers found that having so much bureaucratic responsibility left us almost no time to share our information and ideas about students and teaching. Also, when individuals, whether students or teachers, abused the freedom of the school, we had neither rules nor leaders to give us a framework for working out the problem. Many of us felt that the lack of common goals and practices

among the teachers was confusing and not helpful for any but the most independent students.

It has taken us years to come up with the management structure we have now, and there is no doubt that this will continue to evolve and change. There are several ways, however, in which the present structure reflects our continuing preoccupation with democracy and group participation while gaining in efficiency.

It is significant that we have steadfastly held onto the idea that our administrators should be elected from the staff and are responsible to the staff. All members of the HSC community share in providing general direction as well as criticism and feedback. We seem to work best with a system of group leadership in which no one individual is required to have all leadership skills: each member of the Facilitating Unit can contribute strengths and receive help where it is needed. This also enables any member of the staff to assume a leadership role if he/she is seriously interested in doing so and can convince the rest of the staff to give him/her this opportunity.